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THE BOOK OF THE MONTH

AMERICAN LITERATURE AND PROF. PERRY [1]

BY LAWRENCE GILMAN

"I HAVE sometimes imagined Poe," says Prof. Bliss Perry, "with four other men and one woman, seated at a dinner-table laid for six, and talking of their art and of themselves. What would the others think of Poe? I fancy that Thackeray would chat with him courteously, but would not greatly care for him. George Eliot, woman-like, would pity him. Hawthorne would watch him with those inscrutable eyes and understand him better than the rest. But Stevenson would be immensely interested; he would begin an essay on Poe before he went to sleep. And Mr. Kipling would look sharply at him: he has seen that man before, in *The Gate of a Hundred Sorrows.* All of them would find in him something to praise, a great deal to marvel at, and perhaps not much to love. And the sensitive, shabby, lonely Poe—what would he think of them? He might not care much for the other guests, but I think he would say to himself with a thrill of pride: 'I belong at this table.' And he does."

Dramatized literary encounters of this kind are indubitably fascinating; but are they not illusory as critical touchstones? They recall the shrewd juvenile's comment on an anti-suffragist oration: "Yes, it was great; but she didn't seem to get somewhere." Prof. Perry doesn't seem to get somewhere. With that happily disposed scene he seeks to drive home his estimate of Poe. But does it really help us in understanding Poe to perceive that Thackeray would not greatly care for him? Tolstoi would not greatly care for him, either; nor, probably, would Louisa M. Alcott; and it is altogether likely that he would bore Mr. George Moore to tears (though we recall no pronouncement of his

[1] *The American Spirit in Literature,* by Bliss Perry. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1918.

on the subject in his recent disquisition on English narrative prose). But does it matter in the least? The late Claude Debussy, a subtle and profound creator of musical loveliness, could find nothing better to say of the mighty Bach than that he was " naif and worthy "; and *Parsifal* for him was merely " pretty ". William Dean Howells is cold to Meredith. H. G. Wells has spoken seriously of Scott. It is hard to imagine Henry James displaying irritation; but would he have been happy in the company of that penetrative social historian, Mr. George Ade?

It would be absurd, of course, to take too seriously Prof. Perry's imaginary dinner party; but we cannot help feeling that a certain inclination toward facile summarization, toward a too complacent critical habit, is demonstrated in his little rearrangement of history. If it were clear that he posed the fanciful encounter for his own and his readers' gaiety, or for certain reflected lights that it might throw, one would smile sympathetically and pass on. But Prof. Perry is too obviously moved by the confrontations he evokes to leave one quite easy in one's own mind about the validity of his sense of humor and his critical responsibility. The thing is too patly corroborative of the suspicions that cloud one's association with Prof. Perry's adventures among American authors when one finds him wishing that the palaces reared by Poe's magic ring " were not in such a sombre land "; when one finds him wishing that Poe's imagination could have compassed the sight of " man going forth to his toil and returning to his hearthstone, the America that laughs as it labors." It is disheartening to find a critic who has been entrusted with such a task as that of defining and estimating the achievements of a national literature indulging in stupid relaxations of that sort. Apparently our American criticism has not yet wholly outgrown the immaturities that have so long constrained and vitiated it. To charge up demerits against Poe because he was unable to perceive the normalities of proletarian America, or because the haunted palaces of his dark and burdened dreams were not sunny suburban bungalows, is a depressing instance of the kind of abysmal fatuity that, one supposed, even American criticism had passed beyond. Apparently this is not so; and we must still expect to find some of our critical appraisers reprehending writers and painters and musicians for the lack of qualities wholly antithetical to their special type of genius—for failing

to wear the buskin when Nature intended them for fairy rounds; for failing to declaim blank verse when Nature meant them for idyllic flutings; blaming eagles for not being larks, and nightingales for not being lions. Prof. Perry might as well chide Herrick for lacking tragic passion, or Swinburne for lacking marmoreal coolness, as to lament the macabre sombreness of Poe. It is incredible that Prof. Perry should seemingly fail to recognize (he has certainly given no sign to the contrary) that Poe is precious to us just because his palaces *are* " reared in a sombre land "; just because " infernal lights " *do* gleam in their windows, and because the winds that blow among their towers are burdened with horror, and their corridors reek of death. Who in heaven's name (except Prof. Perry) would have Poe " normal " and " wholesome " and a Pillar of Society in the poetic commonwealth?

It is preposterous that one should have to state solemnly such elementary critical truisms; yet apparently there is no end or limit to the bland fatuousness of academic American criticism at its worst.

Prof. Perry was entrusted with a delicate and unusually responsible undertaking. His task was to record and appraise the achievements of American men of letters, as part of the admirable and ambitious scheme of the Yale University Press for a series of historical narratives to be issued in fifty volumes under the general title of " The Chronicles of America ", edited by the Larned Professor of American History at Yale, Allen Johnson, and supervised by the University Council's Committee on Publications. The conception of this work, which has been in preparation for some years under the direction of Prof. Johnson, is unexampled in our historical literature. The intention is to present the entire history of America's growth in the form of a series of short narratives, each having a unity of its own, but all articulated, and so related that the reader, it has been hoped, " will be given a real vision of the development of this country from the beginning to the present day." The intent of the editor and publishers has been, they tell us, " to make the traditions of our nation more real and vivid to those of our citizens who are not in the habit of reading history." Ten volumes of the projected fifty have already been issued: *Elizabethan Sea Dogs,* " a Chronicle of Drake and his Companions," by William Wood; *Crusaders of New France,*

" a Chronicle of the Fleur-de-lis in the Wilderness," by William Bennett Munro; *Pioneers of the Old South,* " a Chronicle of English Colonial Beginnings," by Mary Johnston; *The Conquest of New France,* " a Chronicle of the Colonial Wars," by George M. Wrong; *The Eve of the Revolution,* " a Chronicle of the Breach with England," by Carl Becker; *Washington and his Colleagues,* " a Chronicle of the Rise and Fall of Federalism," by Henry Jones Ford; *The Forty-Niners,* " a Chronicle of the California Trail and El Dorado," by Steward Edward White; *The Passing of the Frontier,* " a Chronicle of the Old West," by Emerson Hough; *Abraham Lincoln and the Union,* " a Chronicle of the Embattled North," by Nathaniel W. Stephenson; and, finally, Professor Perry's *The American Spirit in Literature,* " a Chronicle of Great Interpreters." The remaining two-score volumes are to traverse a comprehensive plan, from Ellsworth Huntington's record of aboriginal America, *The Red Man's Continent,* through the winning of Independence, the vision of the West, and the storm of secession, to the " noontide of America," which will include, among other accounts, Samuel P. Orth's *The Armies of Labor,* John Moody's *The Masters of Capital,* Harold Howland's *Theodore Roosevelt and his Times,* and *Woodrow Wilson and the Great War* (the authorship of which, we are shyly told, is " to be arranged ").

The plan is spacious and dignified, if not thorough—apparently, so far as one can judge from the detailed prospectus, " the entire history of our country " need take account of only one of the arts, literature; the achievements of American painting, American sculpture, American music, do not appear to exist for the projectors of " The Chronicles of America." This will leave in the minds of future students of the growth of American civilization the impression that Thomas Bailey Aldrich and Richard Watson Gilder and Edmund Clarence Stedman—who are respectfully discussed by Prof. Perry—are more consequential figures in the spiritual history of our national life than Sargent and George Inness and Winslow Homer, St. Gaudens and Stephen Foster and MacDowell. If the omission was intentional, it is inexplicable; if it was a careless oversight, arising from the familiar indifference of educators and men of letters to any of the arts but literature, it is inexcusable.

In view of the fact that *The American Spirit in Litera-*

ture is the only one of the fifty volumes which concerns itself with the aesthetic side of the nation's history, it will be realized that Prof. Perry's responsibility was a grave one. He has himself, in a measure, recognized this fact. "The fundamental problem of our literature, as this book has attempted to trace it," he says, "has been to obtain from a mixed population dwelling in sections as widely separated as the peoples of Northern and Southern Europe, an integral intellectual and spiritual activity which could express, in obedience to the laws of beauty and truth, the emotions stimulated by our national life." That is truly and admirably said: and, so far as skill and scholarship are concerned, Prof. Perry succeeds in providing a valuable framework for an interpretation of the expressions of that activity which he has sought to study. His criticism is gentlemanly and accomplished. But scholarship and skill and literary breeding were not enough. The broadest sympathy was requisite, flexibility and sensitive understanding were requisite, and a complete freedom from inhibitions. These qualities Prof. Perry does not command. He is bland and incurious when he should be searching and eager and alert; he is complacent toward the established, when he should be inquisitorial and challenging.

He is superficial and patronizing toward the Transcendentalists. There is no evidence that he is aware of the richness and brilliancy of Thoreau's genius. He seems to have thought it worth while to tell us that Whitman "is not a fireside poet." Concerning Longfellow, he comes to the remarkable conclusion that "the confession of a lack of regard for his verse must often be recognized as a confession of a lessening love for what is simple, graceful, and refined"—if your taste runs against Longfellow, he warns his reader by implication, take care lest you set yourself down as a "consciously clever, half-trained person." But Longfellow "has his tranquil place in the Poet's Corner of Westminster Abbey"; and that seems to settle the authenticity of his genius for Prof. Perry. Well, Abraham Cowley is there, too.

Bemoaning the fact that contemporary readers are cold to Hawthorne, Prof. Perry essays to describe the "wholly different kind of style" which "our public" has learned to enjoy. This style, "taught by the daily journals," is "a nervous, graphic, sensational, physical style, fit for describ-

ing an automobile, a department store, a steamship, a lynching party"; this is "the style of our day"—the style, shall one say, of Mr. Galsworthy, Edith Wharton, George Moore? What does Prof. Perry mean by "our public"? The public of Mrs. Wharton and Conrad and Frank Swinnerton? The public of Mr. Robert Chambers? The public of Harold Bell Wright? How can Prof. Perry permit himself to indulge in such shallow and reckless and unqualified generalizations in a serious piece of interpretive criticism? What, moreover, is one to think of a presumably scrupulous study of the American spirit in literature which apologizes for not discussing the contributions of Madison Cawein and Edward Rowland Sill, and ignores, with no apology whatever, such salient embodiments of that spirit as Frank Norris, Ambrose Bierce, Carl Sandburg, Vachel Lindsay, Theodore Dreiser; which pays tribute to Miss Agnes Repplier and has not a word to say about William James; in which Joaquin Miller is celebrated to the extent of three-quarters of a page, and the author of that poignant delineation of New England souls, *Ethan Frome,* can find no place; in which Rose Terry Cooke is saluted, but not Stephen Crane; in which the verse of Richard Watson Gilder is exhibited as revealing "an opaline intensity of fire," while the amazing poetic renaissance of the last few years is dismissed with a non-committal paragraph, and the profoundly significant *Spoon River Anthology* of Mr. Masters is disposed of in precisely seven words?

It is not pleasant to say these things; but the fact is glaring and inescapable that *The American Spirit in Literature* is a singularly inadequate performance. It is infinitely regrettable that this kind of critical thinking must stand as the single representative of aesthetic interpretation in so important and promising an undertaking as *The Chronicles of America.*

LAWRENCE GILMAN.